

INTRODUCTION

I am one of many hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions by now, of young men and women of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who have served full time proselyting missions for the church. Although it might be considered a normal right of passage for young Mormon men, each one has his own background and story. Some dream of missionary service for all of their young lives, while others find their motivation to serve much later. The miracle is that so many do serve, and serve so well.

The Lord, Jesus Christ, himself issued a grand call to his original apostles to "... Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). I know of no group of people in all the Christian world who have taken this admonition more seriously than the young men and women of the LDS church. I once befriended an elderly man while living in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, who would often marvel at our young missionaries. While not of my faith, he would comment on the positive feeling he would get each time they passed. They

bring hope to a troubled world. I read parts of a popular book as a young man titled, "The Ugly American", that described the misguided and negative effect of United States diplomats on foreign countries and their people. I think I can safely call Mormon missionaries the anti Ugly Americans for the good that they do everywhere they go.

Beginning in mid 1978, I lived and served for 22 months in the central American country of Guatemala. I ate hundreds of pounds of black beans, rice, eggs, and tortillas - sweltered in the tropical heat of the low lying areas - shivered in the cold winter rain of the highlands - walked thousands of miles - suffered bouts of debilitating dysentery - and literally wore myself out. And yet, 36 years later, I continue to treasure those transforming experiences. The young men and women with whom I was privileged to serve continue as as sort of "Band of Brothers". The bond that develops in that supercharged environment is deep and lasting.

I have spoken of my missionary experiences many times to my family and friends. They have always kindly tolerated my often repeated reminiscences. And I believe it has had a good effect in their lives, as

each of my six children have served their own missions. We can now speak the shared language of the returned missionary.

My greatest hope is that my words convey my sincere love and respect for the beautiful people of Guatemala. They are a believing people. They have joy for life, even though their personal situations are nearly always less than ideal. I came to enjoy their many idiosyncrasies, as I believe they came to enjoy mine. They are among God's choicest children.



CHAPTER 1 - WHY SERVE?

I could make a long list of reasons why young men and women choose to serve. I believe that it ultimately comes down to a commitment to serve God. To respond affirmatively to a call from His living mouthpiece on earth - His prophet. The other reasons for serving, no matter how inspired, will eventually need to lead to this fundamental commitment.

Let me share my own experience. Throughout my teenage years, I was asked repeatedly by my church leaders about my desire to serve. I usually shrugged my shoulders, smiled, and said maybe. But really deep down, I was thinking that I did not have the time to take two years of my life to go on a mission. I had other more more important aspirations. I was a top level competitive swimmer, and had dreams of international competitions including the Olympic Games. I also valued academics, and planned to go to medical school and become a physician. In my mind, a mission did not carry the importance of those goals. Also, in the early 1970's, most young men did not serve a mission. It seemed to me that

mostly the super religious or the weird were accepting the call to serve.

This all changed for me during my freshman year of high school. While attending my daily religious class (release time seminary), I was surprised during an early April class when our instructor brought out a television to watch the opening session of the church's general conference. In those days (1974), the church's general conference started on Friday and ran for three days instead of the current two day format. A new prophet had been called the previous December with the passing of President Harold B. Lee. His name was Spencer W. Kimball. Up until this point in my life, I had watched or listened to very few general conference sessions. And even though, President Kimball had been a general authority of the church for decades, I was almost completely unaware of him. I knew that he had written a famous church book, "The Miracle of Forgiveness", but very little else. I do not recall the details of his address that day, but I do remember how I felt. The tone of his message was straightforward, some might even say blunt. He challenged me to take my religious living much more seriously. I had a strong feeling that the things he was telling the church (and me) were right. This

seemed a strange thing to me coming from this odd looking little man with the bald head, big ears, and the gravelly voice. Nevertheless, his words had a powerful impression on me.

In the ensuing months, President Kimball challenged the young men of the church to step up and serve. It was our Priesthood duty and the Lord expected us to prepare and affirmatively answer the call. Each time he spoke, I felt that his words were true. This did not mean that I immediately was fully committed. I still had my doubts and my long held dreams, but I began to consider the possibility.

As most of us have learned, change generally happens slowly. As I opened my mind and heart to the possibility of missionary service, I started to change. I began to take the church and its teachings more seriously. I listened more often to the counsel of church leaders. I became more actively involved in church service. And as I did, my life slowly changed for the better. My attitude toward spiritual things became more accepting. I treated my family and friends better. I became a much happier person. I read the Book of Mormon regularly, and became converted to its message. My athletic goals fell by the wayside, and I put my academic aspirations in their appropriate place. I recognized that serving a

mission would not prevent me in any way from becoming a physician - it would just happen two years later. I gradually and naturally gained a desire to serve a full time mission. A desire grounded in a commitment to God, and to the building up of his work - not mine. I saw similar changes in many of my friends. It became cool to want to serve a mission. What an amazing change in just a few years. I have always believed that President Spencer W. Kimball was raised up for just this time, to deliver this most important message.



CHAPTER 2 - PREPARATION

How does one prepare to serve a full time mission for the LDS church? Because it is such unique activity, to my knowledge there is not a tried and true method. Many different church settings are used for missionary preparation, and many books have been written. The goal of most of these efforts is to help young men and women obtain at least a rudimentary knowledge of gospel principles and doctrines. The efforts are admirable, but in retrospect are less than adequate. Even the most prepared young man or woman, is in for a culture shock of gigantic proportions - new food, a rigid and demanding work schedule, living with a 24 hour a day companion, living away from home, and often attempting to learn a new language. How do you prepare for such a massive change in focus and lifestyle?

The answer is the MTC. The Missionary Training Center is the spiritual equivalent of the military's Boot Camp. Depending on your field of service and the language requirements, you spend anywhere from three weeks to three months in intense

preparation. I lived for eight long weeks from mid July to mid September of 1978 in the Provo Utah MTC. Definitely not the most enjoyable eight weeks of my life. We were presented a long list of rules and a strict schedule. I was highly motivated to be the best missionary possible, so I made myself crazy trying to live every rule and requirement. For instance, we were to keep our shoes shined regularly, so I shined mine every day. We were to speak our assigned language all of the time except in church meetings, and so I strictly obeyed, even if it compromised important communication with others.

I was assigned my first missionary companion, Elder Mark Larson, from Taylorsville, Utah. We shared a room with two other missionaries - Elder Joe Robinson and Elder Larry Lougee. Elder Larson, Elder Robinson and I meshed well, but Larry Lougee was a different matter. He came from a very unstructured life - he had basically been living on his own in the backwoods for a few years before presenting for missionary service. He couldn't get acclimated to the MTC schedule. He was used to sleeping in the day and prowling around at night. So, for the initial 3-4 weeks of our stay in the MTC he would thrash around in the

night, talking to himself, and keeping the rest of us from sleeping. You couldn't ask for a reassignment, so we had to deal with it.

We were also assigned to a District composed of ten missionaries scheduled to serve in the same Guatemalan mission. This was one of hundreds of missionary districts which were then organized into branches composed of half a dozen districts. Each branch was led by a president - a married man with a family who lived in the Provo area with his own full time job. The district met twice daily for language and missionary training. These sessions were taught by two separate returned missionaries fluent in our assigned language, Spanish. One teacher in the morning, and one in the afternoon. I must admit that our exposure to these recently returned missionaries (both students at Brigham Young University) was the highlight of our MTC experience. These men were admirable in every way. They were smart, motivated, highly capable, and fun. They were excellent models for everything we were trying to become. Our twice daily 2-3 hour sessions were intense, with a complete immersion in the language. The teaching sessions were completely interactive with everyone speaking and actively participating. I would leave each class



session mentally and physically exhausted. We then had a period of personal study for another 3 hours after dinner. This was done in a large room - the branch meeting room where our Sunday services were held. It was called "retention". Imagine 70+ missionaries practicing out loud the language lessons that they had received that particular day. What a curious sight! Everyone lined up in his or her desk along the walls and in the corners, sound eliminating headphones in place, practicing their language and missionary discussions out loud - trying to be oblivious to everyone else.

The MTC was also our first exposure to "Preparation Day". The districts and branches were equally divided amongst the six days (Monday-Saturday). On P-Day we did not have our regular classes. We were expected to attend the Provo Temple, wash our clothes, write our letters home, and complete any needed shopping. It was always a rush to complete all the tasks before the 5 PM witching hour when we were to return to our missionary activities. The evening P-Day class was a popular diversion from our language training activities. This weekly session was a cultural introduction taught by a native Guatemalan. Our class was taught by a returned missionary married

to an American. Her younger brother also happened to be serving at the time in our Guatemalan mission. She was fun, and it was exciting to learn about the rich Guatemalan culture.

Gradually, we became adjusted to the radical change in our lives. The daily work did not become any easier, but our ability to cope and eventually thrive increased. Little by little the language became a bit more comprehensible, and the life of a missionary became a bit more comfortable. In the initial weeks, the missionaries who were nearing the completion of their MTC training were viewed with a kind of awe. They carried themselves differently - confidently - as if they had this whole thing figured out. We wondered if we could possibly ever rise to their level of cool. In retrospect, it seems strange to view other missionaries with barely more preparation than we had, in such a lofty way. It is probably natural in such an intense and compressed world, to look at minor differences in such an exaggerated way. Nonetheless, this interesting hierarchy developed - where a difference of only one or two weeks - conferred on you the status of a veteran.

As previously mentioned, we were organized into a district of ten missionaries - six elders and four

sisters - bound for Guatemala. After our initial interview with our branch president, I was called to be the district leader. Missionary leadership is a topic unto itself - more about this later on. For me, this only heightened my anxiety and "hyper" desire to do everything exactly right. I was expected to meet weekly for a personal interview with each of the members of my district. Imagine sitting in a small room with each of the four sister missionaries and discussing their personal feelings and challenges. The sister missionaries were each at least 1-2 years older than me, and I was expected to give them advice! I had no training in such matters - none of us did. We did the best we could, and somehow got through those sessions.

One of the crazy experiences we had as a district, occurred on the very first day. Our initial interviews had been completed, and we had met with our teachers. They then instructed us to hold an on the spot testimony meeting - with me in charge - and promptly excused themselves. We each stood and shared a bit about ourselves, our beliefs in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and our missionary calling. The last missionary to stand was Elder Herman Shoemake from nearby in Provo. He was extremely nervous, and immediately exclaimed that he could

not handle this whole new missionary life, and was leaving immediately for home. Everybody looked to me to say something - after all I was the district leader. Of course, I had no idea what to say or do. Elder Shoemake promptly left the room and then the MTC. I quickly informed the branch president what had transpired. I had obviously completely botched my first leadership opportunity. He smiled and reassured me that I had done nothing wrong. He said he would speak with Elder Shoemake's family, and that I should not be overly worried. This was obviously not the first time this had happened. After spending the night at his home, Elder Shoemake returned the next morning. In the ensuing weeks, he continued to regularly express misgivings about his ability to continue his mission, but he never left again. He continued to struggle after our arrival in Guatemala, regularly discussing returning home. But each time I would see him over the ensuing months, he was a little less shaky, and a little more confident. By the end of his two year service, he had become one of the best and most solid elders in the mission. Sometimes, we just need to try, do the best we can, and the Lord gradually makes something of us.

After the initial six weeks passed, the longed for

moment came when we met with a representative of the church's travel department to receive our flight plans. This was the day you had truly arrived. We were now the cocky veterans, and carried ourselves as such. We now had the that confident bounce in our step. The remaining days passed quickly. We were bused to the Salt Lake International Airport on September 12, 1978. We briefly met with immediate family for our last goodbyes, and away we went. We had no idea what we were in for!



CHAPTER 3 - GUATEMALA CITY

The first time you leave the United States is a unique time. Especially, to travel for more than a visit to an emerging country like Guatemala. I was a little fearful, but mostly looking forward to a grand adventure. I would have to say that Guatemala fit my wildest imagination. What an amazing place! As you fly into Guatemala City, you see this series of volcanos through the airplane window, and you realize that you are not in Kansas anymore, Elder. The noise, the smells, the craziness of the place were magical to me. After a brief orientation in the mission headquarters, I was off to the eastern side of the city with my new companion, Elder Reid Later.

A green missionary in a foreign land is a jarring experience. I had worked like a fiend in the MTC to learn my missionary language, only to find out that I had absolutely no ability to effectively communicate. The native Guatemalans spoke so quickly and without clarity that I had no idea what was being said. The confusing part of all this was my companion's ease with the situation. He



comprehended every word and maintained an easy conversation with everyone. How did he do it! I tagged along with a smile on my face, and realized that this was not going to be an easy transition. It was reassuring that my companion did not seem surprised at my lack of language skills, and in fact seemed to expect it.

We traveled from place to place by walking or using the city bus system. The city buses were a diesel spewing collection of dilapidated relics that defied the laws of mechanical engineering. Most of the time they were filled beyond capacity, with the last three or four passengers standing on the entrance stairs. I admit that I thought it was pretty cool to be the last man on the bus, holding onto the rearview mirror to keep from falling off. It was also the end of the rainy season, so we trudged around for hours in the mud.

Two weeks into my initial month the city government decided to raise the bus fare from 5 to 10 cents. This decision was met not with resignation as we usually see in our country, but open rebellion. Every day at 5 PM the residents of the city would stand outside their homes and bang on garbage can lids in protest of the rate increase. Bands of young people would attack and burn

buses. Many businesses went on strike. We were restricted to our apartment for 3-4 days until things began to settle down. After a week of this craziness, the bus fare was reduced back to 5 cents and life went on as before.

This was an experience like nothing I had ever imagined, and I loved it. We met with such interesting people as well. They loved to talk in their sing-songy rhythm and snap their fingers when someone said something clever. We would teach a missionary lesson, and then guitars would be produced and songs sung. The people were so kind and genuinely interested in our message. We talked of angelic visitations, ancient records on gold plates, and miracles. Such talk in the United States would often be met with great skepticism, but not with these beautiful people. They had a strong foundation in a God of miracles. Of course God could perform amazing feats, He is God after all! Their challenge was not in difficulty accepting our message (we were rarely openly rejected), but in following through on the commitments made to read the "The Book of Mormon", attend Sunday church meetings, and live the church's health code. We carried around bags of a cereal based, non caffeinated coffee called "Morcafe" to help ease the

transition from their heavy coffee use. I greatly enjoyed almost everything about being a missionary in this interesting country among these fascinating people. Little by little my language skills improved, and I was able to contribute more actively in the teaching and fellowshipping.

My companion, Elder Reid Later was a unique character as well. Although he was from the small farming community of Rigby, Idaho, his tastes were definitely big city. He had served his entire mission to that point in Guatemala City. He had made it quite clear to the mission leadership that he would be unwilling to serve in any of the outlying pueblos (small towns). He was famous for his collection of cologne - ranging in value from a few dollars per bottle to the 50+ dollar per bottle range. Depending on his mood when he arose in the morning, he would choose which value of cologne to apply. The worse he felt, the lower the dollar value of the cologne. He also made sure that each day at 2 PM we would stop, place our right hand over our heart, and look to the sky for the daily Pan Am flight to Los Angeles. Despite his heavy case of "bagginess", we had fun and did good work. I believe that he secretly loved Guatemala, but could not bring himself to admit it.



The initial month flew by - so much to see and do. I looked forward to several more months of service in this interesting city. As the missionary transfer time approached (transfers in those days occurred monthly), I was surprised when my companion informed me that we were both up for transfers. He was tightly connected to the mission scuttlebutt, and so had advanced warning of this potential change. This was my first exposure to mission politics. Unfortunately, he was correct. After one quick month, I was off to eastern Guatemala, Chiquimula.



CHAPTER 4 - CHIQUIMULA

Travel between cities was almost as sketchy as the Guatemala City bus system. I joined a missionary from the mission office, Elder Jason Urry, for the four hour trip by chicken bus to the Zone headquarters in Zacapa. His companion, Elder Valladares, and my new companion, Elder Pew, were to meet us at the bus station in Zacapa. The bus ride was a new and different experience. We traveled in an old converted school bus filled with a variety of people, produce, and animals - mainly chickens. Vendors would come to the windows with a variety of awful looking food for sale. The heat, the diesel exhaust, and the smell of the food made for an uncomfortable combination. We slowly made our way to Zacapa, arriving in the early evening. To my surprise, no missionaries were there to greet us. Elder Urry seemed unconcerned, and promptly found a somewhat comfortable spot under a tree. Using his luggage as a pillow, he stretched out for a nap. I shrugged and followed suit. Two hours passed and I became resigned to spending the night under the tree. The two missionaries then strolled up, helped us with our luggage, and off we

went to their apartment. No excuses were made for their late arrival. Apparently, life for a missionary out in the pueblos, was a rather flexible proposition.

The next morning, my companion and I, traveled by bus the short distance to Chiquimula, and I was introduced to my new living quarters. To call these accomodations an apartment was stretching the facts a bit. It was a second floor tin shed with only the barest of essentials - two small cots, and two rickety chairs. We lived out of our suitcases, and bathed each morning in the courtyard of the building. There was rarely running water, so we would scoop water from a large stone basin. The children who lived in the home would sometimes come out to watch us in our gym shorts, scooping cold water over ourselves.

Chiquimula was a medium sized city of about 25,000 souls. The rainy season was over, and it was hot and dusty. Transportation was completely by foot. We had no bicycles, and there was no city transit system. Very few people had telephones (and that included us), so communication was strictly by word of mouth. The Branch President would often use the missionaries to communicate with his flock regarding church business and activities. It was not unusual to walk 2-3 miles to



speak with a church member. It was fairly typical for us to walk 15-20 miles per day to teach missionary lessons and to communicate and visit with the branch members. The roads were mostly dirt and rock. As my family can attest, I am a somewhat careless walker. I smashed my toes on countless rocks, resulting in disfigured toenails. To this day, I have the ugliest toenails of almost anyone I know.

In Chiquimula, as in most smaller communities in Guatemala, life for the church members and the missionaries centered around the local chapel. The chapels were by local standards quite luxurious. The building was small but well constructed, contained an outdoor basketball court, and was surrounded by a high metal fence topped by broken glass. The basketball court was a popular hangout for the teenagers, and young and old could be found there at the frequent evening activities. It was at the many church functions that I acquired most of my language fluency. The local church members and missionary investigators took delight in helping the new gringo missionary learn how to effectively communicate. I would stutter along, and regularly make a fool of myself, but after a time I lost my embarrassment and forged ahead. I credit these

wonderful people with accelerating my language development.

My first companion in Chiquimula, Elder Warren Pugh, was in his last month of missionary service. It is nearly always an uncomfortable experience for a new missionary to serve with a companion on his last legs. We worked hard doing the usual missionary activities - teaching, fellowshipping, and providing service. But, a missionary at the end has a variety of other concerns - work, school, a return to the real world - that get in the way of the focus on the work. It is human nature to feel a little depressed and homesick as you see your companion prepare to return home. Nevertheless, the time passed fairly quickly, and it was on to a new companion, Elder Jeff Pistorius, from Granger, Utah.

Elder Pistorius and I got along fairly well. We were both from the west side of the Salt Lake Valley, and had several mutual friends back home. He was sent to Chiquimula after serving as the mission secretary for the previous nine months, so he was anxious to get back in the missionary groove. He had a great sense of humor, and was popular with the locals and the other missionaries in the area. We spent my first Christmas in Guatemala together. The

Christmas season is completely different in Guatemala than back in the states. The first major difference is the weather. The second major difference is the lack of commerciality. Nobody had any money, so there was no needless worry about gifts. Families and friends spent the day together eating tamales and setting off fireworks. We had invitations to visit at least a dozen homes on Christmas day. It was fun to move from home to home, soaking up the fun and general good spirit. I loved tamales, but consumed so many that first Christmas day that I cannot bring myself to this day to eat another tamale. It reminded me that you can easily get too much of a good thing. A lesson that life has helped me relearn many times.

One funny story warrants mention from my service with Elder Pistorius. Due to his lengthy time spent in the mission office in Guatemala City, he had developed many contacts and friends. One in particular, provided him with a large jar of American Peanut Butter. This was an amazing treat. Our daily meals of eggs, black beans, tortillas, and bananas became maddeningly monotonous. To have peanut butter from home was an almost miraculous luxury. We would each take a serving of peanut butter each day with our tortillas. But only

one serving, so as to make it last as long as possible. On the 3rd or 4th day, in a careless moment, I dropped the glass jar of peanut butter, and it completely shattered, ruining the contents. Elder Pistorius was in the adjacent room at the time. I can still remember his face as he came rushing into the room. He looked at the floor, then looked at me, and with superhuman restraint did an about face and left the room. Not a word was said. We were both so heartbroken that we barely spoke to each other for the next few days. Isn't it amazing the things we set our hearts upon? It seems so trivial now, but in that difficult and challenging environment it was just about the end of the world.

Since I served my mission in Latin America, everyone assumes that I was involved in many baptisms. I did participate in teaching and baptizing a number of wonderful Guatemalans, but the numbers were certainly not staggering. It is amazing to see the spiritual changes that occur in precious sons and daughters of God, but it is by no means an easy process for anyone. Not easy for the individual investigating the church, and not easy for the missionaries providing the teaching. One humble man stands out during my months spent in Chiquimula. This good brother was initially



contacted by Elder Pistorius and myself while talking to folks on the street. Rarely, did we have much success with this method for finding interested persons to teach. Nevertheless, this good brother invited us to his home to learn more about our message. This man was middle aged, married, and had no children at home. His wife was not interested. At each visit, he listened intently, asked good questions, and enthusiastically accepted our challenges to study and attend church. Unlike many of his countrymen, he was always faithful to his commitments. He was soon baptized, and attended church meetings every Sunday for the remainder of my service in Chiquimula. To me he was a marvel. He required no prodding or special treatment. He humbly did all that was asked of him. So often, we are up and down in our commitments. Easily swayed by our changing circumstances and moods. This man set an example for me of the great value in spiritual consistency. I have often thought of him, as I have tried to follow that pattern in my own life.

At the conclusion of my initial four months of service, my language skills and adjustment to the life of a full time missionary had reached a decent level of competence. I had finally become

serviceable. At this positive place, I was blessed to begin service with Elder Lehi White. Elder White had come to Guatemala one year before me with a group that included Elder Later, Elder Pistorius, and Elder Urry. Those elders had served capably and without problem, but Elder White's service had been difficult and less than exemplary. He freely admitted the poor start to his mission. However, he had made wonderful changes in his attitude and commitment, and was excited to make amends. He proposed that we start our workday as early as possible - 6 AM - and that we work the entire day with only a brief stop at about 9 AM for breakfast, noon for lunch, and 9 PM for dinner. I thought it sounded like fun, so away we went. We would head out of our apartment at 6 AM, and hunt for early risers to share our gospel message. This usually meant women making their morning tortillas, and men getting ready for work. This approach was certainly unusual, but we were generally well received by these kind and good hearted people. As a treat to ourselves, we would visit the local ice cream shop each evening at the close of our work for a bowl of the best ice cream anywhere in the country - often running into the zone leaders from Zacapa - it was that good. We worked hard, and we also played hard. Every P-day, we would travel

someplace interesting. Some weeks we hitched a ride with the zone leaders to Guatemala City for a visit to McDonalds for a Big Mac fix, or we would hop a bus to one of the many cool tourist sites. One week we went to the Rio Dulce, another to the Mayan ruins at Quirigua. I had such a great time serving with this missionary. We did good work and we had fun. I felt I was really coming into my own as a missionary. Those three productive months flew by, and my time in Chiquimula had reached its conclusion. Could being a missionary get any better than this? I was about to find out that it could indeed get even better. Next stop - the northern jungles of the Yucatan peninsula - the Peten.



CHAPTER 5 - FLORES/SAN BENITO/SANTA ELENA, PETEN

Guatemala is an exotic location for a white kid from Utah. A transfer to the jungles of the Yucatan peninsula took exotic to a whole new level. In 1979, the region was so remote that travel to the area by bus or car was considered completely impractical. Unpredictable roads and weather between Guatemala City and the Peten region meant at least a 2-3 day trip by ground. So, I boarded a small airplane for the two hour flight. As we taxied down the runway for takeoff, I looked out the window and noticed that one of the tires had gone flat. The plane stopped, and we were ushered onto a new plane. The national airline of Guatemala, Aviateca, was commonly referred to by the term, "Aviatureca" or air crash, by the missionaries. Was I worried? Only a little bit. It mostly just added to the sense of adventure and fun.

My new companion, Elder Fred Preciado, was at the airport in Santa Elena with Brother Humberto Miranda, a local church leader with a small pick up truck. I can still remember the blast of heat and

humidity that greeted me as I exited the plane. I am a product of the southwestern United States - desert country. This was a completely foreign experience - completely different, but intriguing, We lived in the second floor of a rented building on the shore of Lake Peten Itza. The building also served as the local church meetinghouse. We had a balcony from which I saw the most beautiful sunsets. I regularly awoke from dreams in which I am back in this magical place.

We had much work to do in this large isolated area. We worked primarily in the town of San Benito which was located across the lake to the south of our apartment in the island town of Flores. The two sister missionaries who served with us covered Flores and the other town across the lake, Santa Elena. The island communicated with the mainland via a causeway and by boat. We had bicycles - the only area in the mission to do so - given the distances we traveled. We would ferry our bikes by boat if we were in a hurry to get to San Benito, or pedal our way across the causeway when time permitted. The bikes were crappy, and required a good deal of maintenance. The dirt roads were awful in the rain, and required that we remove the mud guards. Mud guards only work if you have no



mud!

The branch was small, but the field truly was white for the harvest. The humble people of San Benito had great interest in our message. We visited and taught dozens of families. Due to the isolation of the area, there was very little television or other forms of entertainment. We had our little filmstrip projector that we strapped onto our bikes. The children would see us coming and run behind us shouting "Cine, Cine" (Movie, Movie). Needless to say, we never lacked for an audience for our presentations. We capitalized on this interest by hosting a weekly "Noche Mormona" - Mormon Night. We would gather at the home of one of our investigator families and provide a gospel oriented message followed by one of the church produced filmstrips. It didn't take long to commit the complete dialogue of these short films to memory. This would be followed by entertainment and refreshments. The entertainment was exceptionally good. Guitars accompanied wonderful singing of local music, and many of the young children would provide poetic recitation. These were dramatic recitations of memorized poetry. I marveled at their skill and talent. There was always a marvelous spirit at these weekly activities. It was not unusual

to have 50-100 persons present. It made the teaching and learning of the gospel of Jesus Christ interesting and fun to all involved.

Our Sunday church services were initially small - 20 to 30 attendees. As we began teaching more and more families, and especially after starting the weekly Noche Mormona activities, church attendance swelled to upwards of 100 persons. As our church attendance increased, we felt the need to improve our Sunday services. We encouraged the local branch president to call a young church member to teach the weekly adult Sunday School lesson. This choice young man was 17 year old, Hari Pena. Hari grew up in a home in the bush without running water or electricity. Despite the lack of basic necessities, he taught himself to expertly play the piano, and was well versed in literature and science. I think he is one of the most intelligent people I have ever met. He was a fantastic teacher. He made the gospel exciting and cool. I could see the Lord's hand in the amazing progress made in this small isolated community. He raises up special individuals to accomplish his divine purpose.

I served for two months with Elder Preciado before he completed his mission. He was a most



interesting young man. He was born to a single 15 year old mother. Consequently he was raised by his grandparents on a dairy farm outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. They spoke only Spanish, so he was perfectly bilingual. When church leaders would come to the mission from Salt Lake City, he would provide the translation at missionary meetings. He was minimally involved in the church during his teen years, but had a change of heart after injuring his pitching arm. He was a major league pitching prospect before the injury. Major League baseball's loss was our gain. Because of his rough upbringing and natural abilities and talents, he was able to connect with people of the Peten in a unique way. He moved easily between languages and between people of different backgrounds. I marveled at his skillful teaching, and the easy connection he made with people. I greatly appreciated the confidence he had in me. He told me that he had complete trust that I could continue the momentum we had built during our two months together. I suspect he shared this feeling with the mission president. Because of the isolated nature of our assignment in the Peten, missionaries assigned there had always been led by an experienced missionary. I was still rather inexperienced, so the assignment for me to lead the four missionaries was unexpected. I loved the area,

and was excited for the continued opportunity to serve in this fantastic place.

My new companion was a green missionary from Honduras, Elder Danilo Ordonez. He had only been a member of the church for one year before entering the mission. Despite his lack of church experience, I was impressed by his grasp of the work. He knew how to work, and was spiritually mature and confident. His suggestions to help the work to improve were always inspired and helpful. I quickly came to trust and to depend on him. Our first days together were not without some fun at his expense. He had never ridden a bicycle. Most kids in my neighborhood learned to ride a bike almost as soon as they could walk. It was fun to watch this full grown man stiffly climb aboard a bike for the first time. He had no feel for the bike. He sat ramrod straight and violently pumped the pedals. At first, I had to stop and wait frequently to allow him to catch up. However, after a few weeks I was the one who had trouble keeping up with his powerful legs.

The gospel of Jesus Christ truly changes lives. One good sister's story remains with me. She was a middle aged woman with two sons - a teenager and a boy of about ten years of age. Elder Preciado and I first met this family while teaching a neighboring



family. As we taught this family, we could hear this woman weeping and wailing next door. The family informed us that her husband had just recently passed away, and she was performing the typical catholic mourning rituals of wearing only black clothing, and the day and night crying.. This seemed excessive and unusual to us. Death had always been a sad but private experience back home in America. This family encouraged us to visit this woman and her family. She kindly accepted our visits, and we started teaching the missionary lessons. Even though, she could not read, she was able to take hold of our message. Perhaps her grief was helpful in sensitizing her spirit to our message. Over a period of several weeks, her awful gloom gradually lifted. She put away her black clothing and began to live again. I can still remember the day she was baptized.

Baptisms in the Peten were an awesome experience. There was no baptismal font in the church, so baptisms were performed in the lake. We would commission several of the ferry boats, fill them with church members and investigators, and travel twenty minutes to a small uninhabited island in the middle of the lake. The occasions were appropriately festive. We sang songs as we traveled to and from our little baptism island, and everyone



shared in the new member's happy day. Baptismal services are always happy and fun, but the services in the Peten were certainly the most joyous that I have been privileged to witness. When we returned to the chapel for the confirmation of this good sister, she stood and shared her feelings. To see the great change that the gospel of Jesus Christ had made in her life, to see the light that emanated from her face was breathtaking. Truly, the greatest miracles that God performs, are the individual transformations.

Missionaries are magnificently watched over by the Lord. One Sunday morning, I awoke feeling sick and miserable. My body ached, my stomach was turning somersaults, and I could barely stand. What could I do? Sunday's for a missionary are the busiest and most important day of the week. There were Sunday services to attend, investigators to greet and help during the meetings, classes to teach, a baptismal service to organize, and families to visit and teach. As I laid in my bed wondering what to do, there came to my mind a discussion I had with my Stake President during my interview prior to receiving the Melchizedek Priesthood. We reviewed Section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants that contains the oath and covenant of the

Priesthood, that promises that if we are faithful in serving in our Priesthood responsibilities, the Lord will renew our bodies. My friend and church leader, Chuck Canfield, shared with me his experiences with this promise. He worked in a high pressure position as the CEO of a Salt Lake City bank, and often felt completely drained at the end of his work day, only to face his heavy ecclesiastical responsibilities on his return home in the evening. He shared with me the many times he had received strength beyond his own to complete his Priesthood assignments. I latched on to that thought, a thought that I am sure came through the Spirit of God. I slowly climbed out of bed, and did my best to get started with the day. At first I was weak and wobbly, but as the day progressed I felt better and better. I was able to meet all the day's work and responsibility. I remember as I rode my bicycle back across the causeway at 9 PM to return home for the night, that I felt as strong as I ever had - stronger! What a revelation to a young inexperienced man. To really know that God was mindful of me, and would help me if I tried my best to do his work.

Serving in such an isolated area had its interesting challenges and perks. We were two elders and two



sister missionaries far from the mission headquarters. We had a phone and were expected to call the mission office every P-day to check in. Every Monday morning after breakfast, I would call the local operator to put through the call. There were no direct phone lines to other parts of the country. The call would usually go through about three hours later. I would speak with one of the office missionaries, and confirm we were still alive. We four missionaries looked after each other. We had our weekly district meeting to discuss the work, and on occasion traveled to local tourist sites together. Fortunately, we had in the Peten area one of the greatest tourist sites in the world - the Mayan ruins at Tikal. We made the trip to Tikal on three separate P-days during my six months of service in the Peten. The first trip with our friend Humberto Miranda, in the back of his pick up truck. The second in the local police chief's Toyota Landcruiser. The third in a helicopter/airplane - the sister's in the helicopter, my companion and I in the airplane - used by the local government/military leader in the area. It was certainly exciting to travel via this lastly mentioned high class route, but I believe we enjoyed the trip with Humberto Miranda the most. Years before he had worked at the Tikal site during some of its excavation, work done by

the University of Pennsylvania. He knew many details of the amazing pyramids, that even the local tour guides did not know. What an amazing site! It was dumbfounding to climb those massive temples built 1500 years before. Each of the stones that made up the temples had to weigh many tons. How did they do it? The technological feat was awesome to contemplate. Sometimes, we think that our world and intellectual progress dwarves anything produced by past generations. It was humbling to recognize that a so called primitive civilization could produce a complex of buildings, an amazing aqueduct water system, and precise astronomical calculations that are difficult for our advanced society to reproduce.

In the later stages of my six months of service in the Peten, we met and taught one of the great families of this amazing country, the family Torres. Brother Julio Torres owned a watch repair shop, and he and his wife had two young children. He was a serious and sober man who strictly avoided many of the local vices - alcohol and promiscuity being the two most prominent ones. Consequently, he was looked up to by his neighbors and friends as a man to be trusted. As we taught his family the gospel, we felt a great spirit. This was a substantial family that



could do much to lead and build the young church in this area. We were also teaching several of their neighbors and friends the missionary lessons, but could see that they were waiting to see what this family would do before they committed. The lessons went well, but this good man and his wife would not commit to baptism until they truly had their own personal witness from God that this was His church. I remember praying with great intensity that the Lord would give this witness to them. As I did, I had an overwhelming feeling of peace, and for one of the first times in my life, I had an absolute assurance that my prayer would be answered. When we next visited with this family, Brother Torres shared a wonderful dream that he had experienced. In his dream, he found himself in a dark wasteland where he wandered alone and afraid. He prayed for deliverance, and then heard a voice tell him that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, and to go forward to join His church. I think we floated home after that meeting. Humbled and overjoyed that the Lord had kindly given this good man and his family the personal witness that they so desired. The baptismal service the following Sunday of Brother Julio Torres, his wife and young daughter was sensational. After this good family broke the ice, all of the investigating neighbors and

families in the area followed their example. Twenty years later, I returned to Guatemala with my wife and six children. When we visited the Peten, and attended church in their beautiful chapel in San Benito, Brother Torres was the sacrament meeting speaker. I was asked to give the closing prayer for the meeting, and was then embraced by this wonderful family. I met their 15 year old son, who of course had not been born when we taught them the gospel. As we had hoped those twenty years before, this family had been stalwart leaders and examples of righteousness in this amazing place. The church had grown marvelously, and this choice family had been at the center of it all.



CHAPTER 6 - JUTIAPA

You the reader have no doubt noticed a great many "amazings" and "wonderfuls" as I have described the first 15 months of my mission. I make no apologies. For the most part those 15 months were awesome. So, it is no surprise that I was due for some adversity. After the highs I experienced in the Peten, anywhere would have likely fallen short in comparison. Jutiapa is a fairly unremarkable medium sized city in the southeast corner of Guatemala. It was the zone headquarters for that portion of the mission, and I was a newly assigned zone leader. My experience with mission leadership had been mixed. Some leaders were excellent, while others were mediocre at best. It is easy to start a mission with an idealized view of mission leaders. The idea that they are the cream of the missionary crop, and that a call to serve as a leader is recognition of excellent service. Unfortunately, not every man is cut out by temperament or by ability to be a leader. The missionary I was called to serve with as zone leader in Jutiapa did not have the desire to be a good leader nor the desire to be even an effective missionary. He was a young man with



many gifts including intelligence, personality, and charisma. Unfortunately, he had little to no interest in the day to day grind that makes up a missionary's life. Missionary work is demanding and tiring. It requires a genuine love for the people and a willingness to become deeply involved in their lives. This young man's heart was not in the work. He didn't mind the traveling to visit the missionaries in our zone, and to mission headquarters for our regular training sessions, but had no interest in the daily finding and teaching of new investigators to the church. Consequently, we were miserable together. For my own sanity, I would arrange to make visits to investigators and branch members with young men from the branch as my companions. My companion would stay in our apartment reading newspapers and magazines. Obviously, not an ideal arrangement. I would ask myself if I should talk to the mission president about the situation, but would always have the feeling that my companion would just be assigned to some other unfortunate missionary. I tried to make the best of an unpleasant situation. I am not sure it was the right decision, but it made the most sense to me. Needless to say, we had very little success during our four long months together. Missionary service in many ways mirrors our lives.

There are incredible highs and lows, and you have to be able to deal with both situations. After all, why are we here? There is little growth when all we experience is a smooth ride. I take comfort in the fact that I did the best that I could with a difficult situation. I did everything I knew to help this companion to find his way. And even though, most days I wanted to punch him in the face, I always treated him kindly and with respect. We did not part ways on bad terms. The overwhelming feeling I have to this day is sadness and disappointment that I was unable to reach him.

What a blessing it was to work the final three months of my service in Jutiapa with Elder Michael Johnson. Elder Johnson had served the first 12 months of his mission in El Salvador.

Unfortunately, the civil war in that country necessitated the reassignment of those missionaries to the other four central American missions. There was a bit of an adjustment for both of us. He to a new country and mission, and me to a missionary who talked constantly about how awesome it was to serve in El Salvador. There is nothing like a war or a natural disaster to get people interested in the gospel. Not long before my arrival in Guatemala there had been a major earthquake, and the older



missionaries talked about how on fire the mission had been for the months after the earthquake. So it was with the missionaries from El Salvador. After a short time, we both made the needed adjustment and away we went. Jutiapa had been known as a pit in the mission for years. Sluggish growth had been the norm for quite some time including my initial four months. As I honestly looked at the situation in Jutiapa, I could see no reason for the apathy other than a poor attitude all around, especially in the missionaries. So we set out to change that attitude, starting with ourselves. The church had announced plans to build a new chapel in Jutiapa, and we used that as a launching point for our efforts. It was a new day for the branch, and in those three months we served together I believe we made a good start in changing the feeling in this city. We focused on helping the branch members to feel pride in their new chapel, and in their church membership.

Gradually the attitude changed, and our missionary efforts started to bear fruit. Even though, we did not baptize anyone during our time together, I felt extremely positive about the future. When I met with the new mission president, Carlos Amado, for my final interview at the conclusion of my mission, he asked about Jutiapa. He wondered why it had such a negative feeling among the missionaries. I

told him that things were changing, and I predicted that it would soon become a stronghold for the mission. He seemed only mildly encouraged, but things did change for the better. I had occasion to speak to missionaries that followed me in Guatemala, and I always asked about Jutiapa. They reported that it had become one of the best areas in the mission.

The Jutiapa zone was fairly large, and we were provided a Datsun truck to get around. This truck had been brought to Guatemala by a senior couple, who had sold it to the mission at the completion of their time. It was cool to have a vehicle, but costly. In the days before the equalization of missionary expenditures/budgets, missionaries paid their own monthly expenses. Guatemala had a low cost of living except for gasoline which was twice the cost of gasoline back home in the USA. Whereas, my expenses had generally been in the \$100-150 per month range up until then, they now skyrocketed to the \$300+ range. Quite a shock to my parents back home, who were also supporting two other missionaries. I found out later that they took an extra job cleaning the bank where my mother worked as the assistant manager to make up the difference. I freely acknowledge my appreciation

for their efforts, and I have always felt happy that I could pass on that appreciation by providing financially for my six children during their missions.

One of the challenges of missionary service in my time was the lack of a consistent connection to home. Letters from home, although written weekly, were often sporadic in their arrival. We did not have access to the church's semiannual general conference except through church magazines which filtered there way to us months later. Heck, we often communicated with other missionaries by telegram. During my time in Jutiapa as Thanksgiving approached, we had the crazy idea to put together a traditional Thanksgiving day feast for the missionaries in our zone. It wasn't possible to go to the store and purchase the necessary items for the desired feast. Either they weren't available or were only available in their most basic form. The center of a Thanksgiving meal is the turkey, and so we purchased a live turkey. The sister missionaries kept the turkey at their apartment for a month to fatten him up. When it came time to prepare the turkey, they both started to cry at the thought of killing their friend. So, it fell to us to take the turkey and get him ready to cook. My companion and I

were both city boys, so we had no idea what to do. What a sight we were sneaking to the outskirts of town after dark to do the deed. Somehow, we managed to accomplish our task including plucking the feathers. With the assistance of a senior missionary couple, the turkey and all the fixins were prepared. What a fantastic feast! We all had a terrific time celebrating Thanksgiving together, but especially felt that all important connection to home.



CHAPTER 7 - COLONIA MAYA, GUATEMALA CITY

Two months remained after my transfer to the Colonia Maya on the eastern outskirts of Guatemala City. This was a rather poor area with living conditions that were significantly worse than I had experienced. My new companion, Elder Eric Epperson, and I lived in a back room of the home of a middle aged woman and her young children. We had a shower, but only an outhouse for bathroom activities. There was only one way into the home, through this family's bedroom. Not an ideal situation. We belonged to a ward which met in a chapel several miles away. A one hour hike over a substantial hill, or one hour by bus (requiring multiple transfers). Also, not an ideal situation, but we made due.

Eric Epperson was terrific companion. He was enthusiastic and eager to work and learn. We also had a close relationship with the other pair of Elders serving in the area covered by our ward - Elder Jaco from El Salvador, and Elder Nelson from Elder Epperson's hometown of Brigham City, Utah. Elder



Osvaldo Jaco was most impressive. He was a fantastic teacher. When I joined him from time to time on missionary splits in his area, I just tried to stay out of his way. He connected with people. His intelligence, knowledge of the local customs, and his strong testimony of the gospel were a powerful combination. It brought home to me the great advantage of calling full time missionaries to serve in their native lands. I had learned the language reasonably well for a gringo, had gained much experience over the preceding 20 months, but could not begin to teach with the ability and power of this Salvadoran missionary. I was once again reminded that the Lord has talented brothers and sisters in every land, even those who come from areas of poverty and reduced opportunity.

Elder Epperson and I served together for only one month. We did our best, but had a very difficult time getting our investigators to the distant meeting house. Several years later, however, Eric Epperson was contacted by a good brother that we had taught the missionary discussions. This man and his family had become stalwart members of the church in this area, and expressed deep gratitude for the gospel blessings that we had brought to them those many years before. It was exciting and gratifying to learn

that our humble efforts did in fact bear marvelous fruit. I believe it will be wonderful when we pass to the other side, and find out all the ways the the Lord has magnified our feeble attempts to do his work.

I completed my final month of missionary service training a brand new American missionary, Elder Duane Fletcher, from Pasco, Washington. Poor Elder Fletcher, talk about someone out of his depth. This young man was completely unprepared for the culture, the language, the schedule, and the hard work. I quickly realized that he could handle only the barest minimum of the missionary load. I gave him all that I could, but he was only marginally improved after our quick month together.

Missionaries today are so much better prepared than we were in my day.

One interesting experience occurred before I finished my service in the Colonia Maya. On a preparation day activity playing soccer, I severely sprained my ankle. We had moved to a new apartment (minimal improvement on our previous arrangement), and the owner saw me hobbling around on my bum ankle. He promptly brought over the local "doctor" to fix my ankle. I did not trust my ankle to this man and his voodoo, but could not dissuade him without causing great



offense. He was a great bear of a man with large meaty hands. He brought with him a jar of lard, and proceeded to use the lard to help aggressively massage my injured foot. As he worked on me, I thought my foot would be ruined. But to my surprise and delight, at the conclusion of the treatment, my swelling and pain were greatly reduced. I had once again been served a piece of humble Guatemalan pie! We think that we are so sophisticated and advanced, but really we fall far behind these amazing people in so many ways. It is a lesson that I hope to always remember.

CHAPTER 8 - FINAL THOUGHTS

One of the cool things that was available to missionaries in the Guatemala City Mission during the time of my service, was the opportunity to tour for a few days at the completion of our service.

Mark Larson, Herman Shoemake, Joe Robinson and I rented a car and took off for the western side of the country. We visited the stunning Lake Atitlan as well as making stops in Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango, and Huehuetenango. It was fun to visit new places, but mostly it was a good time to share our mutual experiences and decompress from two years of intense spiritual effort. We had been through challenges that would shape the rest of our lives. Over the years we have had only occasional contact, but are forever linked by this amazing shared experience.

If you have ever viewed the many Youtube videos of returning missionaries on their arrival at their home airport, then you have an idea of the strong feelings that accompanied my arrival home. The feelings are a mixture of excitement, nervousness, and relief. But mostly, a feeling of tremendous

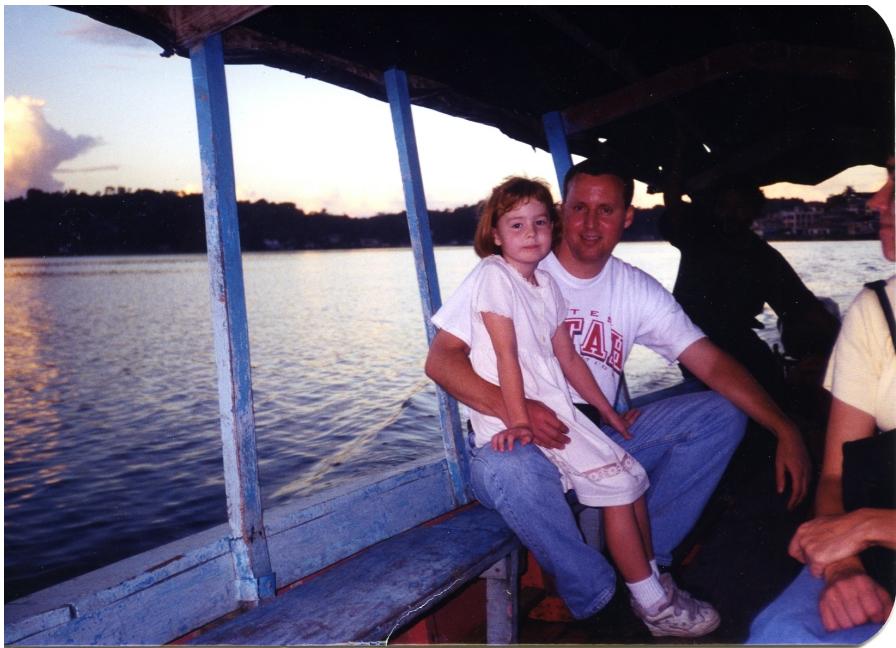


gratitude for the sacrifice of so many to make such an unforgettable experience possible. No one serves a mission in a vacuum. Parents, friends, church leaders and many others play an important role in the service of all missionaries. It truly is a shared blessing for so many. I have been blessed to share this same feeling with all six of my children as they have returned from their outstanding and faithful missionary labors. I have a firm conviction that this work is led and inspired by the Lord himself. He watches over and protects those involved in this marvelous work!

In 1998, I returned with my family to Guatemala for ten days during the Christmas holiday. We traveled to Antigua, Panajachel (Lake Atitlan), the Rio Dulce/Atlantic Ocean, the mayan ruins at Copan (Honduras), and to the ruins at Tikal. My wife and children were able to see for themselves this place I had spoken of for so many years. We had a wonderful time together, and I was able to share with them this picturesque country and its wonderful people. One experience stood out for me that I have previously related. While staying in Flores, Peten, we were able to attend the local Sabbath services. We arrived a few minutes late to the sacrament meeting, and much to my surprise



and pleasure, Brother Julio Torres, was addressing the congregation. Brother Torres and his family were special. Their conversion twenty years earlier was a highlight of my mission and my life. What an amazing reunion! To me it tied together all my feelings and emotions of those precious two years of missionary service. To see these choice brothers and sisters still firm in the faith was a prayer come true for me. I felt like Alma upon meeting the sons of Mosiah after their 14 year mission among the Lamanites. I felt to shout for joy at the mercy of the Lord in allowing me to be his humble instrument in bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to these precious souls. It gave me a small inkling of the joy we will experience when we reunite with our loved ones in the world to come. The blessings of a mission do not stop when we return home, but go on and on, generation to generation. Praise be to the Lord, and the very great privilege I had to serve Him and the marvelous people of this beautiful land.

















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